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Diary writing as a tool for students' self-reflection and teacher's feedback in the Course of Academic Writing

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Abstract

Diary writing is a very effective and natural tool for both students and teachers since this informal writing enables students to reflect on what they have learned, how they have learned it, what kind of difficulties they have when they have to write in formal English or what helps them to overcome these and other difficulties in the process of learning English. In addition, teachers can learn from students' diaries about their constraints in writing and help them to remove them. They can also discover what teaching strategies students appreciate most and implement them in their teaching. The purpose of this article is thus to discuss diary writing used in the Course of Academic Writing at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic, and analyse some of students' entries with respect to teaching approaches and strategies, students' learning preferences and their constraints in writing.

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1. Introduction

One of the courses which are taught at the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) of the University of Hradec Kralove is the Course on Academic Writing. It is an optional, one-semester course whose aim is to help both Czech and foreign or overseas students of the faculty. These students study English as an applied language. This course is designed to develop the kind of English that students will most likely need in their future jobs, specifically, business English. Students graduating from the faculty usually find jobs in tourism, finance and information technologies. Undoubtedly, they will use written communication, such as writing e-mails or reports, on a daily basis.

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The course focuses on the process of writing from beginning to end, and gives advice on how to write professionally. It shows the component parts of the writing process, that is: envisaging what to write, planning an outline, drafting passages, writing the whole thing, revising and rewriting it, and finishing it in an appropriate form, together with publishing all or parts of a text. In addition, it concentrates on those features which are different in English and Czech, such as citations, compiling a bibliography or using appropriate English. As for the last aspect, there are independent sections on grammar structures in written English, lexical structures, and punctuation. The course tries not only to address students' lack of experience in writing formal English language but also to approach writing itself in a new way. The course exposes students to hybrid/blended learning. That means students meet a teacher once every two weeks to discuss and clarify the mistakes they made in their assignments (i.e. essays), while at the same time, students are expected to undertake deep self-study of the materials that form their on-line e-learning course. See Fig. 1 below.

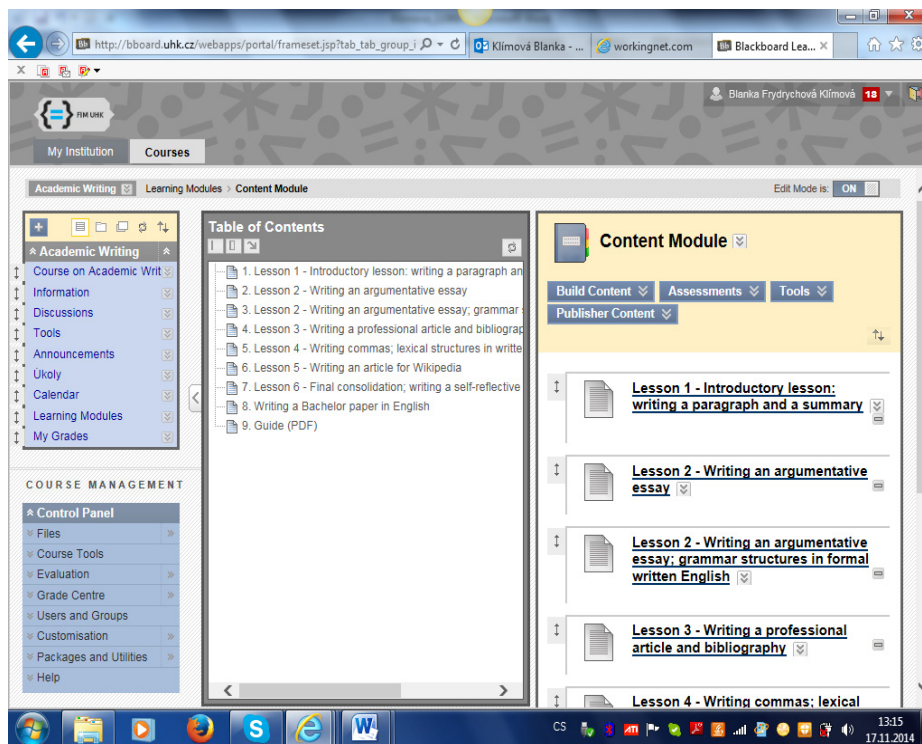


Figure 1. An online Course of Academic Writing and its content

The content of the course and student's assignments (essays) were discussed in Frydrychova Klimova (2012), as well as its evaluation in Frydrychova Klimova (2014). So far the course teacher has used the following evaluation methods for her course: *teacher's evaluation of students' essays*; *course evaluation questionnaires*; and *course self-reflective essays*. The purpose is to obtain useful feedback about the quality of students' learning and teacher's practices. Out of the evaluation methods mentioned above, the self-reflective essay has appeared to be the most beneficial. There are several reasons for it. Firstly, the structure of this essay differs from other formal essays students have to write in this course. The self-reflective essay in fact does not have any fixed format; it is written in the first person singular since students express their personal feelings, experience and experiences in it. Secondly, this essay is not included in the students' final mark and the language mistakes are not corrected. Students are just asked to reflect on what they have learned and experienced in the course in order to help to improve the course, including the teacher's performance in the course. Thirdly, students write this essay the last lesson when they meet their teacher face-to-face. They have the whole 90-minute class for it. Thus, they have enough time to contemplate and reflect on what they have achieved, what kind of difficulties they have when they have to write in formal English or what helps them to overcome these and other difficulties in the process of learning English.

Since the self-reflection essay proved to be a success, particularly for the teacher's feedback about the course, students' difficulties and teaching practices, the course teacher (i.e. the author of this article) this semester (winter 2014) decided to ask students to write diaries within this course because diary writing is also a kind of self-reflection. Moreover, in this case it is continuous personal writing.

2. Diary writing

Diary, also called a journal, is a notebook where people can write anything they want such as their thoughts, ideas, feelings or experiences. Each person may have a different reason for writing a diary. Someone is worried about forgetting most of the things they have done. Someone is afraid to talk to other people. There can be a lot of reasons. For example, some people are ashamed of their secrets or they just do not want to reveal them. All these reasons may lead to diary writing. Diaries can be written on a daily basis, but at least once a week.

Diaries also play an important role in the learning of languages. As Rubin (2003) points out, more successful learners are in control of their learning; they know what they are doing and what they want to achieve; they know when they make mistakes; and they know how to go about correcting them. And in this process teachers can help their students provided that students allow them to see their diaries, comment on them and make relevant suggestions. In their classes teachers can then employ the technique of scaffolding, a kind of support which would help students in their learning and overcoming their learning difficulties. Rubin (ibid.) proposes the following ways of using diaries in an effective way:

- The teacher can look over each diary and make suggestions.
- The teacher can ask peers to look over each other's diaries and make suggestions.
This can be very efficient for a number of reasons (a) peers can often suggest other ways to address a problem (b) peers can learn from the solutions of their fellow peers, and (c) the teacher may not have time to read all the diaries but learners can still get input this way.
- After several diary assignments are in, learners can be asked to look through them and see what their own patterns of problems are and what their strategies for solving them are.
- The teacher can look over the diaries and see what patterns of problems and solutions individual learners have and make suggestions.

Thus, students of the Course of Academic Writing during their Introductory Lesson of the course were asked to start writing diaries. They were, of course, given some guidelines (for more information see Appendix A) on how they should proceed in writing their diaries, what format and content their diaries should have, i.e. they should be connected with their experience/s and feelings while learning English. In addition, one of the essays given to them in the third course assignment was on diary writing.

Out of 15 students who are enrolled in the course, just four have been willing to share their diary with the teacher. All of them have written them in an electronic form so that they can submit them online, which also gives evidence about the privacy of diary writing. Students usually make the diary entry once a week and they prefer to write it in their native language, i.e. Czech. Just the foreign students, who study at FIM, do it in English. Students' entries show that students are quite aware not only of their shortcomings in the learning of English but also of the strategies which can help them to improve this process of learning. The only obstacle in the improvement of this process seems to be their procrastination which has been also mentioned in their entries.

4. Conclusion

Diary writing is undoubtedly a very effective strategy for the whole learning process. However, it is not as easy as it seems since not all the students are willing to share it with their teacher and not all the students are ready to write the diary entries as the course has shown so far. Nevertheless, writing diaries is very useful both for the teacher in getting students' feedback about their learning constraints and difficulties and for students to learn how to learn. And as Race (2002) says:

Reflection deepens learning. The act of reflecting is one which causes us to make sense of what we've learned, why we learned it, and how that particular increment of learning took place. Moreover, reflection is about linking one increment of learning to the wider perspective of learning – heading towards seeing the bigger picture. Reflection is equally useful when our learning has been unsuccessful – in such cases indeed reflection can often give us insights into what may have gone wrong with our learning, and how on a future occasion we might avoid now-

known pitfalls. Most of all, however, it is increasingly recognised that reflection is an important transferable skill, and is much valued by all around us, in employment, as well as in life in general.

Appendix A – Guidelines for writing a diary

Try to record your entries after class, at least once a week. Record in your diary any thoughts about the lesson on Academic Writing or any other lesson of English. Write date/day and a few sentences about your achievements or problems in learning English.

In addition, the diary can include the following details:

1. What problems do/did you have in class or at home when learning English? How did you deal with these problems? How well did these solutions work for you?
2. As you approach a task, what do you do before, during, and after to complete the task?
(Be sure to write about a specific task, do not state what you usually do. The closer your report is to an actual text or class, the more you will understand your patterns of problems and solutions). Do you feel that what you did was useful? If not, can you think of something else that might work for you?
3. Describe how you feel as you work on the assignment or in class? What did you do about those feelings? Did it help? If not, can you think of something else that might work for you?
4. If this is your second or third assignment, what did you do differently, based on comments on your prior assignment by the teacher or your peers? Was it helpful? If so, why? If not, why not?

Appendix B – Examples of students' entries

Student 1

September 24, 2014. Today I had the first lesson of Academic writing. It was rather interesting. I understood that I do not know quite a lot of important rules of official writing.

October 8, 2014. I have learnt many new linking words and phrases.

October 21, 2014. I've started reading a book in English. Almost everything is clear. I abstract new words and phrases into cards.

October 25, 2014. I've done some exercises on phrasal verbs from the book by Murphy. Practiced conversational English by chatting on Facebook.

November 9, 2014. Watched some educational videos on phrasal verbs. Things are getting better

Student 2

14/10/14

I already fell more comfortable in using English, it is because of all my lessons and also I have some friends from different countries with whom I'm speaking English, it's really the best thing for me, I think.

21/10/14

We went with my foreign friends on a trip to Adršpach, it was amazing! Also it was a whole day practice, the place was so great and we wanted to share all our emotions all the time.

28/10/14

Lessons are not busy enough, I need in much more grammar, so I'm learning a little bit at home by myself.

Student 3

2. 10. 2014 - Thursday – The second week has almost passed and I am having more and more work. Lots of essays and presentations And English will not be as easy as I originally thought. In the Course of Practical English the pace is too fast, so I do not even have time to think about anything. I can't manage to read a sentence out loud and at the same time to think what word suits the gap best! I need a bit more time to think about it. I will have to have a look at it at home so that I could know at least something during the lesson. The only thing I knew was listening. But that was probably a coincidence because I have never been good at listening. We will see. Hopefully, in the end everything will turn out well.

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